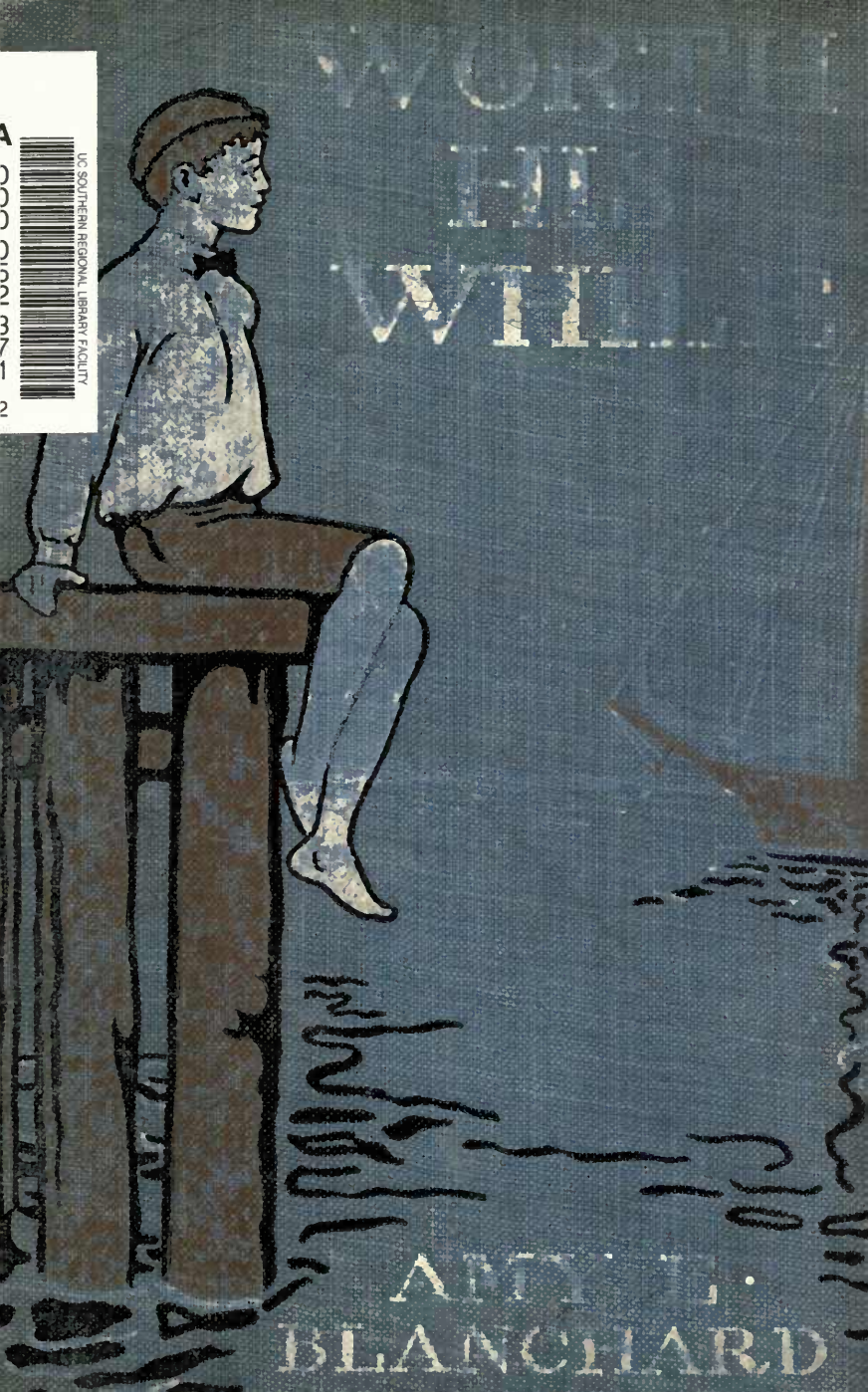

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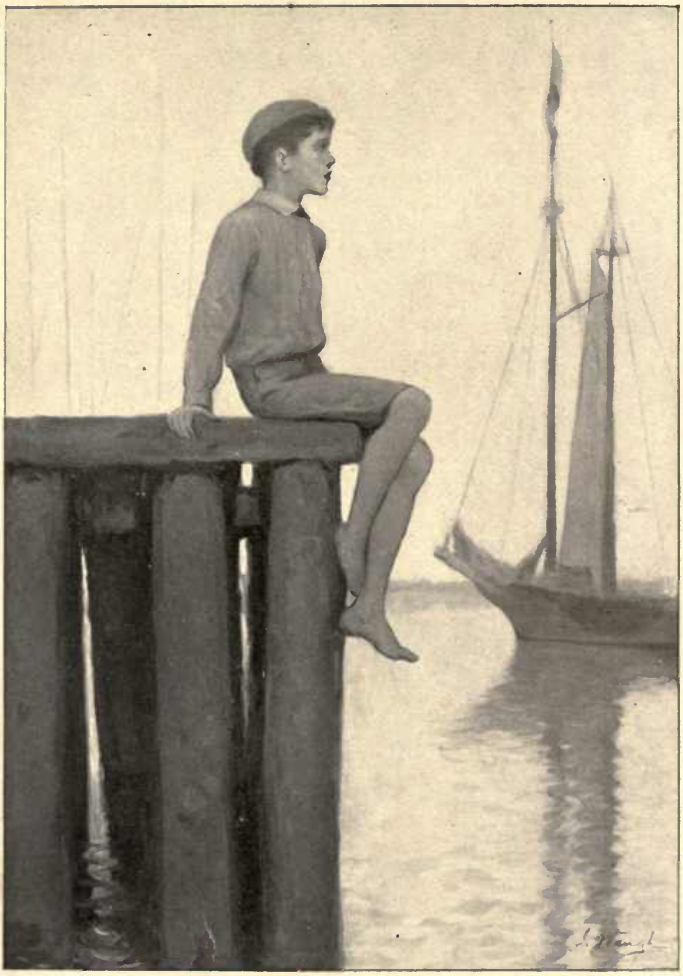

He Sat Swinging His Bare Feet Over the Water

WORTH HIS WHILE

BY

AMY E. BLANCHARD

Author of "Kittyboy's Christmas," "Taking a Stand," "A Dear Little Girl," "Thy Friend Dorothy," Etc.

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CHAPTER I

ON THE WAY TO BIG CREEK

OH, how hot it was! Down in the narrow streets, where straight rows of little brick houses were crowded together there was not the faintest breeze, and even on the wharf where Benny Jordan sat swinging his bare feet over the water, it was scarcely cooler. Usually there were little waves splashing up against the green logs of the pier, but today only the faintest little ripples swished lazily against the piles and the boats lying farther out did not flap a sail.

"It's no good staying here," said Benny to himself, as he got up and stretched his arms over his head. "It's just about as hot as it is at home. I wonder what there

is for supper. My, but I'd like some ice cream! I haven't had any for so long, and I reckon I never will have any again." And at this very sobering thought Benny began to patter along over the sidewalk, almost forgetting that this was the hottest day of the season, entirely too hot for May, and that the big excursion steamer, which he had been waiting to see, would soon be in sight.

"'Tain't any use to wait," he said to himself, as if apologizing. "I'd only see the crowd, and what's a crowd, anyhow?"

So he marched on up the street, passing the fruit stands and ill-smelling warehouses, until he turned into one of the small streets leading out of the thoroughfare, and presently he arrived at a small two-story brick house, one of a long row. So much alike were these buildings that it is a wonder Benny knew how to tell

his own home without counting the doorways.

"Where's mother?" was his question as he reached the door.

His sister Kitty, sitting on the door-step, looked up, "She's upstairs, of course, sewing as hard as she can, and it's so hot."

Benny went pounding up the stairs to the room where his mother sat sewing. "Say, mother, it's too hot to sew," he exclaimed.

"But it isn't too hot to eat, is it?" she said, looking up with a smile. "You know if I didn't sew we wouldn't have anything to eat."

"That's so," replied Benny, slowly.

"Where have you been?" asked his mother, stopping to push back the damp hair from her face.

"I've been down on the wharf; it's

generally cool there, but it's hot everywhere to-day. I like to go there, though; I like to see the people come up from the country with big bundles of flowers, and I like to watch the men unload the boats. They brought such a lot of strawberries to-day."

"This weather ripens them fast. It is very early to have such heat."

"I wish we lived in the country," said Benny. "Isn't it cheaper to live there?"

"Ye-es, if you have some one to work your garden and take care of your stock. But how could I make a living for you and Kitty?"

"We could help," Benny replied.

"Not much, I'm afraid. A little boy ten years old and a little girl seven would scarcely be able to do much toward making a living."

"But shouldn't you like to live there?" persisted Benny.

"I should, indeed," returned his mother, with a sigh. "I was brought up on a farm, you know, and so was your father."

Benny had heard of that farm many, many times. He knew all about the spring and the orchard, the barn and the garden. "Grandfather sold it, didn't he?" was his remark, made regretfully.

"Yes, long ago. Come, we must have some supper. You and sister can set the table."

"What is there for supper?"

"Nothing but bread and molasses, I'm afraid."

"I wish we could have some ice cream and strawberries."

"Now you are making an extravagant wish. We can't have that, but, perhaps, we might have some bread and milk.

You can go and get a quart of milk and we'll have a treat."

Benny's face brightened. Bread and cold milk on a hot day was a much more appetizing prospect than bread and molasses, and the little boy promptly ran down to tell his sister.

"Hurry up, Kit, and set the table; we're going to have bread and milk. Where's a tin bucket?"

Pale little Kitty put down her paper dolls with alacrity, and before long the little family were seated at the table. Slowly and reluctantly the children disposed of the last drop of milk in their bowls.

"If we lived in the country, we could have this every night," Benny said.

"What has set you harping so on the country?" asked Mrs. Jordan.

"Why, I don't know. I reckon it's

hearing the men talk down at the wharf. One of 'em said this morning: 'There's no money for farmers nowadays. A man can't make anything in the country.' 'He can always make a living,' said the other, 'and a pretty good one, too. How'd you like your wife and babies to be in the city this weather? Why, sir, there's lots of folks would give anything to see their children tumble 'round on the grass under such trees as you've got and have all the good milk they wanted to drink. I think we country people are pretty well off, myself. We don't make a fortune, but we've got a good living right handy.'"

Benny unconsciously imitated the man, and his mother laughed.

"You surely took in that conversation, Benny. I'd like well enough to live under the green trees again. It's what your father always planned to do some

day when he had made enough to buy a little place."

Benny looked sober. He always felt as if he wanted to carry out his father's plans, and this looked like a very hard one.

"You make it worth while, and we'll go," said his mother, smiling. "Now I must go back to my buttonholes and you children can clear away the dishes."

"Don't you wish you could find a way to get to the country?" said big-eyed little Kitty, as she carefully put away the last bowl.

Benny turned his round, good-natured, freckled little face toward her. "I'm a goin' to," he said, determinedly. "Mother said she go if I'd make it worth while, and I'm a goin' to."

"Oh, Benny, are you?" said Kitty. She had the utmost confidence in this elder

brother, who, although only three years older, seemed so much larger and stronger than herself, and was a person always to be depended upon to undertake any difficult task. "How are you going to?" she continued.

"I'm a goin' to," reiterated Benny, with the same emphasis. And the fact of his saying this and nothing more gave greater weight to his words. So all that evening Kitty dreamed beautiful dreams of a little home near green meadows and under leafy trees.

Benny's determination had not left him the next day. It was a holiday and Benny pattered off down to the wharf as early as possible. Somehow then it seemed as if that land of delight known as the country were more accessible by reason of the arrival of the crafts which plied between the lower counties and the city. It ap-

peared so easy to step aboard a little steamer and be borne along over the bay to the green shores melting away in the distance. Those shores from which were brought, on the little sailing vessels, mountains of green peas, crates of luscious strawberries, baskets of downy peaches. It represented to Benny a veritable Canaan, that country from which the little vessels came, and many a time he had sat on the pier looking off into the distance and dreaming of the fullness and plenty which he imagined existed there.

He was standing at the gangway of a small steamer which lay moored to her dock, when his attention was arrested by two men who halted near him.

"Hello, Jim!" said one. "What's bringing you to town? Thought this was a busy time with you."

"So it is, or ought to be, but my pick-

ers disappointed me. Here my strawberries and peas are ready and waiting and not a soul to pick 'em. It certainly is aggravating."

"It certainly is," returned his friend. "What you going to do about it?"

"I've come up to see if I can get a new gang. I shall have to take what I can get. People make a very poor mouth, but I notice when anyone wants farm hands of any kind it isn't always so easy to get hold of 'em. Good pay and good food, with good, fresh air thrown in, and yet they shy off. Well, I can't tarry; good-by."

"Well, good luck to you," returned his friend. And then, turning around he saw by his side an eager-faced little lad.

"Well, sonny?" said the man.

"If you please, sir, what did that man want?"

"Pickers, to pick his strawberries and peas for him. Do you know anyone who wants a job in that line?"

"Could I do it?" and Benny's blue eyes were very wistful.

"You? Why I don't know. How old are you?"

"Ten."

"I'm afraid you'd soon give out. It's no fun to stay among the vines all day in the hot sun, and I'll venture to say you wouldn't pick as many for your box as you would for your mouth. How about that?"

Benny shook his head decidedly, "No, sir."

"You wouldn't? Well, I reckon Mr. Bentley will be back here for the afternoon boat. You might ask him then," and the man walked away.

Benny lost no time in speeding home. He burst in upon his mother with the

breathless question, "Mother, may I go down on the 'Emma Jones' and be a picker?"

Mrs. Jordan turned from her machine with a look of amazement. "Why, Benny, what do you mean?"

"Why, there's a man, a Mr. Bentley, who is hunting up people to pick strawberries and peas for him, and maybe I could go. Maybe it would be finding the way, you know, for father's plan."

His mother smiled sadly.

"Dear little lad, I'm afraid Mr. Bentley will not want little boys like you, and besides how can I let my boy go away from me without my knowing anything about where he is going or the people he is to be thrown with."

"I would be good; indeed I would, mother. I'd work awfully hard, and I wouldn't go with bad boys."

"Well, my darling, I'm afraid it would not be best for me to say yes."

"But if Mr. Bentley should want me," pleaded Benny, "I would be right in the country, mother, and I wouldn't get into mischief."

His mother smiled at this absolute faith in the safety of the place. Then she was very thoughtful. "If I could see Mr. Bentley himself, and find out more about it," she said finally.

"Can't I go and try it for a week? Only a week?" begged Benny.

"You may do this—you may ask Mr. Bentley if he will take you, and if he consents, you must tell him that your mother will see Mr. Higgins, who used to live in that neighborhood, and that she will probably send you down to-morrow. I know where the 'Emma Jones' lands, and Mr. Higgins will

know all about it. I will see him this evening."

Benny went off highly pleased with this concession.

Long before two o'clock he was waiting eagerly by the gangway of the "Emma Jones" for Mr. Bentley to appear.

Passengers began to straggle along; here a man with a huge basket, there a woman, followed by two or three hot, tired children, next two or three negroes, ragged and happy, shuffled lazily on board. Presently the captain came up. "Who are you waiting for, sonny?"

"Mr. Bentley."

"Jim Bentley? I reckon he's on the upper deck. I saw Welch up there, and they generally hunt up one another. You go up there and look for him. You might get in the way here." Benny found his way on deck and began looking

along the row of passengers for Mr. Bentley, but not seeing him, he sat down and began to watch the big excursion steamer which lay in the next dock. She was dressed with flags, and the music of the band on her deck made her seem a very gay sort of an affair to Benny.

He was so busy watching the crowds of people gathering aboard this big steamer, that he did not notice the warning sound of a bell, nor the slow movement of paddles, till presently he perceived the dock gliding from sight and found that the "Emma Jones" was actually on her way to Big Creek.

CHAPTER II

BENNY FINDS A FRIEND

FOR a moment Benny was bewildered. He could not tell what he ought to do. He had not been on a steamboat since he was quite a little fellow, and that it was possible to send him ashore was out of the question. "What will mother think?" was his first thought. "How shall I get back?" was his second. He stood looking around him, each moment increasing the distance between the steamboat and the shore.

"Hallo!" cried a voice at his side, "what are you doing here?" And looking up, Benny saw the man whom he had talked to that morning on the dock.

"I don't know what I am doing," he

returned, in a distressed voice. "I'm getting carried off."

"Kidnapped, eh?" Who's the fellow that's run you aboard?"

Benny smiled a little, and told the man his story, ending with, "And I haven't any money to pay my way."

"And you're afraid the captain will throw you overboard to get rid of you. Is that it?"

Benny looked a little disturbed. He didn't know just what the captain might do.

"Well, it won't break me to pay fifteen cents for you," the man said, good-naturedly. "Jim Bentley ain't aboard. He hunted up a lot of pickers and is taking 'em down on his bug-eye; wanted to be sure of 'em this time."

Benny was a little puzzled as to what a bug-eye might be till he remembered that

the small sailing vessels which came up from the truck farms were so called by those familiar with the craft in the bay.

"Yes," continued the man, "Jim's not goin' to let 'em get away this time. There's no boat back this evening, so you can't get back home to-night."

"Oh, what will mother say? She'll be so worried," exclaimed Benny, looking ready to cry.

"Sho! that's too bad. How'll we fix it? You might find a chance to get back real late. There are lots of boats that get loaded up and start off through the night so as to get the loads in for the hucksters by sun-up or earlier; but it seems to me as long as you'll be really down there you might as well try pickin'. I'd give you a job myself, but I don't have any crop. I keep a store at the Cross Roads. Let me see. How'll we fix it?" And the

man rubbed his stubby beard thoughtfully.

Presently he slapped Benny on the shoulder, as a bright idea came to him. "I know!" he exclaimed; "we'll drive 'round by Sanders's. He's got a telephone, and I'll ask him to telephone up to Dick Bond's, at the railroad station, then Dick can telegraph to your mother that you're all right, and that she'll hear from you later. How'll that do?"

Benny's face beamed. "Fine," he responded, gratefully, although he was but half aware of the trouble and expense to which the kind man was placing himself on the little boy's account.

"All right. It's a go. My name is Welch. I'll take you home with me. We'll find a corner for you somewhere, and to-morrow you can go to see Jim Bentley. Like as not Jim'll be over him-

self in the morning. So just make yourself easy."

It was evident that Benny's honest little face had taken the man's fancy, and for the rest of the trip the boy was treated as a guest by Mr. Welch.

The small steamboat was pushing its way along steadily by this time, and Benny gave himself up to the enjoyment of the occasion. Far off a broad expanse of blue water, dotted with white sails, touched the horizon; on each side could be seen banks of vivid green; an old half-ruined fort loomed up before them. Benny could see through the open gateway flowers blooming in the inclosure; a big dog lay sleeping upon a strong parapet. So peaceful and quiet did the fort look that one could scarcely imagine that there had been a time when threatening cannon pointed from those walls and

that armed men stood behind the strong embrasure.

Just beyond the fort the "Emma Jones" turned into a broad creek, along the shores of which were little landings where sail-boats and rowboats were moored. The tall trees were reflected in the placid waters, and Benny caught sight of pink flowers dotting the green of the woods. It seemed a perfect paradise to him. Oh, how Kitty would like to see it! His mother had told him of just such places, but he had not half realized how beautiful they could be.

Every now and then the boat stopped to let off passengers and freight till at the head of the creek the last landing was made, and Benny followed his good friend ashore.

A motley collection of vehicles awaited the arrival of the steamer. Here was a spring wagon drawn by a mule; there

a substantial looking Dayton; soberly standing under a tree were two oxen harnessed to a small cart painted bright blue. An old colored woman in a purple sunbonnet drove the oxen.

Into a big wagon Mr. Welch packed various barrels and bundles, and Benny soon found himself placed betwen an old colored man and Mr. Welch, while the horses trotted briskly along the white-shelled road.

"We're going round by Sanders's," said Mr. Welch to the driver; and this arrangement having been complied with, all fears as to his mother's anxiety disappeared as Benny was told by Mr. Welch that he had made matters all right. "I told Bill to turn on his 'phone, and I waited, so he'd get the message straight. I shouldn't wonder if it was going over the wire this minute. I told him to say,

'Ben in safe hands. Made trip by mistake. Nobody's fault.' That'll let her know you aren't to blame, and it'll ease her mind. I know how mothers feel. Had one myself."

The little country store, before which they finally drew up, was a long white building; a pretty lawn was on one side and a garden in the rear. Outbuildings, a stable and henhouse, woodhouse and corn crib, showed that it was a true country home. There was a little church across the way, a blacksmith shop not far off, and between the two half a dozen houses were scattered. These constituted the village of Jennings's Cross Roads.

Benny clambered down from the wagon and lent a willing hand to the unloading of it, depositing the parcels on the porch in front of the store, not pausing till the last bundle was safe.

"Hot work," said Mr. Welch. "You've earned your supper, Ben; come, let's see what mother has for us."

A rosy-faced woman stood on a side step as Benny and Mr. Welch made their way to the pump in the back yard.

"Got back, Thad?" she said, pleasantly.

"Yes, and brought company," was the reply. "That's my wife, Ben." "Got room for a city visitor, Sue?"

Mrs. Welch looked curiously at Benny. "Why, yes, I reckon so," she answered, and then she joined them at the pump, where Mr. Welch began vigorously to wash his face and hands, telling his wife meanwhile of Benny's adventures.

"That's just like you, Thad," she remarked, as he concluded. But a pleased smile showed that she approved of just such proceedings herself. "Come, sup-

per's ready," she said, and led the way to the dining-room.

Benny never forgot that supper. Hot biscuits and broiled ham; fried potatoes and radishes; a great bowl of huge strawberries served with thick, yellow cream; home-made sponge cake, and milk in unlimited supply.

Mr. Welch kept piling up his plate, with due appreciation of a boy's appetite, till Benny felt that this was a land of plenty indeed, his only regret being that he could not share this feast with his mother and Kitty. Never in all his life had he eaten such a meal.

A little girl about Benny's age sat opposite him; another, four or five years older, and a boy nearly grown made up the additional members of the family.

"Now, Jennie," said Mrs. Welch to her younger daughter, as they rose from the

table, "take Ben with you to feed the chickens; I'll venture to say he won't find a nicer lot anywhere."

Jennie smiled an invitation over her shoulder, and Benny followed her into the poultry yard, where he saw chickens of all sizes, cunning yellow ducklings, and a flock of little turkeys. Then she took him to the barn and displayed to his delighted eyes some little collie puppies.

"How I should like to have one, that dear little fellow with a white spot on his forehead, for instance," thought Benny; and Jennie, as if reading his thoughts, said:

"Now, if you only had a place where you could keep a dog, Joe would give you one of these, I know."

It seemed as if the whole family were interested in the welfare of this little candidate for the office of strawberry picker,

for Benny's childish confidences were given honestly and freely.

He went to sleep that night in a small attic room; a tall locust tree hanging white blooms about the little dormer window, and the sound of a whippoorwill's cry being his last conscious recollection before he went to sleep. He was awakened by stirring sounds out of doors and in, and by the time he was ready for a descent to the lower floor found that the family were up and all at work.

Breakfast was not less bountiful than supper, and after came a second visit to the puppies, during which time he was called in the store to confront Mr. Bentley.

It was evident that the way to a conference had been well paved by Mr. Welch, for Mr. Bentley's greeting was, "Well, boy, you want to join my pickers, I hear."

"Yes, sir," replied Benny.

"How will you manage about your meals? They do their own cooking, you know."

Benny didn't know, and his heart sank, but Mr. Welch's kind voice came in with the question, "'Twouldn't put you out much to let him eat with your regular farm hands, would it?"

"No-o," returned Mr. Bentley, "I don't reckon it would." And then turning to Benny he said, "Well, my boy, you'll find a pretty rough set—Bohemians, and Italians, and Poles, and I don't know what all—but if you've a mind to try it, I'll take you along and give you a chance; that's what you want, I suppose."

"It isn't so hot to-day, must have been a storm somewhere, last night, Thad."

"Yes," returned Mr. Welch, "must have been; I saw thunder heads off to-

ward the northwest; they must have got it down Broad Neck way."

"Well I've no time to lose," said Mr. Bentley; "come along, boy, I'll give you a lift over our way;" and Benny, with a strong regret at leaving this kind family at the Cross Roads, climbed up beside Mr. Bentley in his road cart, and after a ride of a mile saw a white house at the end of a long lane.

"That's my place," said Mr. Bentley. "I'll let you off at the strawberry field, and when you hear the dinner horn come up to the house. That man sitting under the tree yonder is keeping tally. Every dozen boxes you pick you take 'em up there and he'll give you a little wooden check, so that we both can keep count of what you pick. Each check means so much, and you can earn as much or as little as you've the will to do. There's a board over

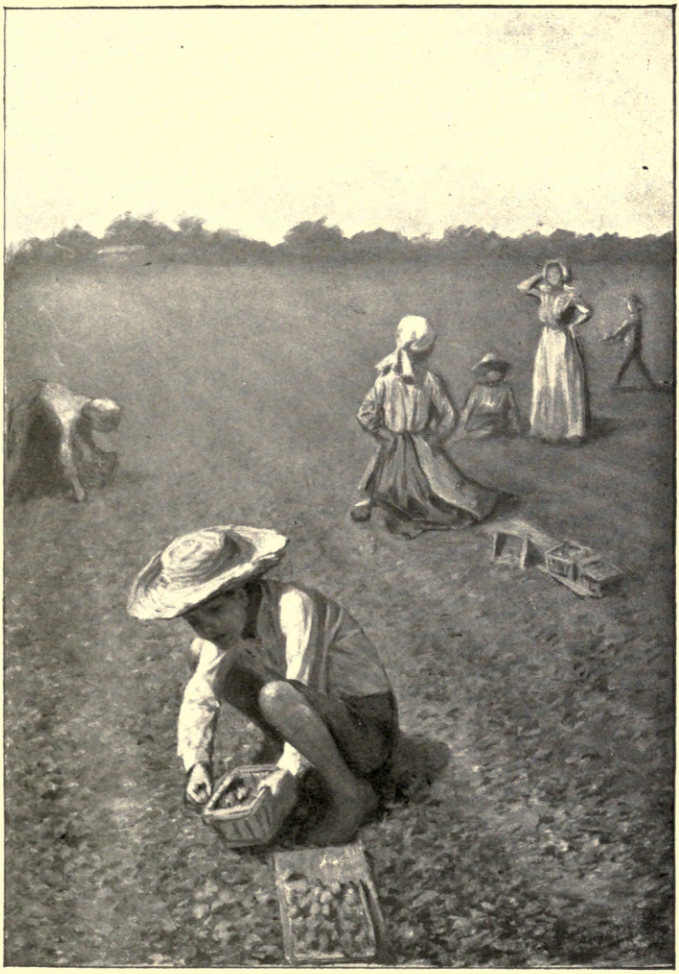
yonder to carry your boxes on. Now, we'll see what you can do."

And Benny was left in the big strawberry field amid a motley crew of foreigners, strong misgivings at heart, and a little feeling of homesickness coming over him as he faced the reality of a day's work in the hot sun, with no one to speak to him but strangers. He picked up courage, however, wondering, as he started to work, how much he could earn, and when his mother would get the queer, blotchy little letter he had written to her the night before.

CHAPTER III

AMONG THE PICKERS

BENNY was not a saint by any means. He was just as full of faults as many other boys, but he had a warm, generous heart, and had been carefully brought up, so, even if he was not always as thoughtful as he might be, and sometimes forgot to be promptly obedient, he was at least truthful, honest, and pure in heart, a fact which made the boys in his neighborhood call him "old Particular," or "old Partick" for short. He was used to pretty rough company sometimes, but he had never been thrown with quite such a crowd as that which surrounded him in the strawberry patch. Coarse, boorish men, vixenish, loud-voiced women, who



It Was Not Very Pleasant Work

jostled and elbowed him at times, the younger ones teasing and badgering him in queer broken English.

It was not very pleasant work to stoop over the vines with the sun beating down on his head, and his fingers becoming weary of the constant picking. Therefore the first half a day Benny did not make much headway, and was glad enough when twelve o'clock came, and the pickers trooped to their quarters, leaving Benny to find his way to the house, where he was to take his meals in the kitchen with the farm hands. A coarse, but plentiful meal, was provided; it consisted of bacon, cabbage, and corn bread, and Benny was hungry enough to eat heartily.

As he was returning to the field, he spied a pretty little girl about three years of age sitting on the kitchen step playing

with a kitten. She smiled up at Benny and began to chatter to him in her baby way, so that he could not resist stopping to talk to her, and while she was laughing merrily at some of his tricks her little brother, a couple of years older, came around the corner of the house, and the three were soon having a very jolly time. But Benny suddenly became aware that he was wasting too much time, and made ready to go back to his work.

"Don't go," begged the little boy. "Pleathe don't go," lisped the little girl.

"I must," returned Benny. "I have work to do."

"Come back soon," shouted the little boy after him, "I like you." And Benny went on, somewhat cheered by these new friends he had made.

It was, nevertheless, a long day, and

when the evening came he crept off by himself to listen to the whippoorwills and to look at the bright stars shining over the tops of the trees.

"The country's nice enough," he said to himself, "but it isn't much fun to be a picker." Then he thought of his mother and sister in the narrow, hot street, and wished they were with him. A sound of wild mirth, of snatches of song, of wrangling and shouting came to him from the pickers' quarters. He dreaded returning to their midst and wished that he could sleep in the little white bed at Mr. Welch's or in his own tiny room at home, instead of in one of those queer-looking bunks roughly made of boards and built along the sides of the room.

If his mother could have seen her boy that night asleep in that crowd of strange-looking persons, she would have been

even more concerned than she was for his welfare.

Two or three days passed and Benny became more used to his surroundings. He made friends with some of the pickers, who took him under their protection when one big boy bullied him; but still he felt strange and out of place among them.

It was on the second day that he was elbowed out of his place, before some particularly well-filled vines, by a big, scowling Polish boy, who said, "You no beezness here, zis is for me."

"I'd like to know why," replied Benny, manfully.

"I come first," retorted the boy, thrusting Benny aside.

"You may have come first to Mr. Bentley's, but I came to this place first, and I'm going to stay," continued Benny, valiantly holding his position.

The big boy doubled up his fists threateningly, and muttered something in a foreign tongue. Then he made a dash at Benny, but just as he reached him he was caught by the shoulder and a voice said, "Here, here, none of this! Get back to your place, you big fellow. You belong farther up the line," and Benny saw that the overseer was at his side. "That's an ugly chap," he said to Benny, as Ivan departed, muttering. "I'm sorry we brought him. He doesn't seem to make friends, and is a pretty mean enemy. You'd better keep out of his way. If he cuts up too high, just let me know, and I'll drop him."

Benny went back to his work much relieved, but it was evident that from henceforth Ivan bore him a grudge. He tried in numerous ways to annoy the little boy. Once he roughly ran against

him, upsetting his load of a dozen boxes of strawberries which Benny was carrying on a board to where Mr. Bentley was keeping tally. This meant loss of time as well as of berries, for some of them were too crushed to be returned to their boxes, and Benny with rage in his heart, but with a helpless feeling, gathered up his fruit as best he could, knowing that what to the casual observer looked like an accident, was, in fact, an act of spite on the part of Ivan.

Another time Benny had placed eleven boxes on a board and was filling the twelfth when Ivan deftly caught up the board and disappeared with it; so when Benny turned around it was nowhere to be seen.

"Where are my berries?" he exclaimed, but there seemed to be no one who had seen the berries disappear, and Benny,

cheated a second time, felt as if he could cry. There was such a woe-begone look on his face that Mr. Bentley noticed it when he next came up.

"What's the matter, boy?" he said. "Want to go home?" And Benny, in the fullness of his heart, told him what was wrong.

"Sho!" he returned. "That's a shame. Still we've no proof as to who took them. You'll have to watch sharp. This is a pretty mean gang I have here this year. I had to take what I could get. Don't you want to go over to the store for me instead of picking this afternoon? I haven't anyone I can spare to send, and my wife wants the mail, and two or three things I forgot to get when I was over last. She hauled me over the coals for forgetting. I'll give you just the same as if you were picking, and

I think I can trust you not to waste your time."

Benny's face brightened, and after receiving his instructions he started off heartily glad for the business which took him again to kind Mr. Welch's.

His way led through the pines a short distance, then through another piece of woods, and over the shell road till he came to the cross roads.

Little Jennie was the first to spy him as he came up. "Hallo, Ben," she said. "Aren't you going to stay at Mr. Bentley's?"

"Oh, yes; but he sent me over for the mail, and for some things Mrs. Bentley wanted."

"I hoped you'd stay. Father has a letter for you; it came down on the boat with a bundle of clothes your mother sent."

Benny hurried into the store to hear what Mr. Welch had to say, and to receive his package. At sight of his mother's little letter he felt a great longing to see her. "Kitty is not very well. She misses you sadly," wrote his mother. "I'm glad my boy is trying to help me, but I shall be even more glad to see him again."

Benny looked at rosy little Jennie and sighed.

"What makes you so solemn?" she asked. "What are you thinking about?"

"I was wishing my little sister was as rosy and round as you are, and had such nice pink cheeks," replied Benny.

Jennie laughed, and then she asked, "Why, is she sick?"

"Yes, kind of sick. She never was very strong. The doctor says she ought to live in the country."

Jennie's round face took on a serious look, and presently she went up to her father and whispered something. "That must be as your mother says," he answered, giving a snap to the string with which he was tying up Benny's packages.

"Can you manage all these packages and your bundle?" he asked the boy.

"Oh, yes," said Benny. "These things aren't heavy, and my bundle hasn't much in it. I can easily take them all."

"Sorry you can't stay to tea," said Mr. Welch. "Come over and spend Sunday with us; can't you?"

"I should like to," replied Benny, delightedly.

"Come over Saturday night—you might as well—and go to Sunday school

with the children; they'd like to have you."

"Poor little youngster," he said, as Benny turned away with a happier face than he had worn when he came. "I like the little chap. I started out pretty young myself, and I know what it is."

Benny turned to go back with a light step. It was late in the afternoon, and already growing shadowy in the deep pine grove through which he had to pass. He was not afraid, however, for he had sense enough to know that there were neither bears nor wildcats thereabouts, and he did not even consider whether he would encounter a snake. He caught sight of a gray squirrel scampering up a tree, and saw a clumsy land turtle traveling slowly along.

"I never saw one of those queer chaps before," said Benny to himself. "Isn't it

funny how they carry their houses on their backs? It's mighty convenient, I suppose, but I think I should find it rather tiresome. Oh, there's a rabbit. My! but there's a lot of things to see in the woods. Ever so many people live here, for all they keep out of sight most of the time." And Benny chuckled to himself at the thought.

He kept on steadily till he was about in the middle of the woods, when presently there came from the thicket close by a sound between a growl and a moan, and the boy stood still to listen. The sound was repeated, and this time it sounded nearer. Benny was no coward, but it must be confessed that his heart misgave him, and for a moment he stood uncertain whether to run or whether to investigate the matter.

"I'll see what it is, I won't be silly,"

he told himself. "Maybe somebody is hurt in there." And he dauntlessly followed the sound as a cry of distress reached his ears. Then he seized a stick and rushed forward.

CHAPTER IV

A HIDDEN ENEMY

AS Benny dashed valiantly into the thicket he was seized by the leg and pulled to the ground, while some one jumped up from the bushes, and he found himself face to face with Ivan, who gave an evil grin, and said, "There young feller, I have you now, I make you pay."

Benny's heart stood still; he knew he was not able to cope with this big, powerful fellow, but he struggled to his feet and stood silently regarding his enemy, who still held him fast. Then he looked around helplessly for a way of escape, but only the dark, sombre forest spread around him, and he knew if he should attempt to run, that he would be very speedily over-

taken. Then he thought of the errand upon which he had been sent and which he had hoped to execute promptly and well. Mr. Bentley had said he trusted him.

Ivan's hand continued to clutch him as he stood scowling above him.

"I must take these things to Mrs. Bentley," began Benny, helplessly.

"No," said Ivan, "you do not take. You lose them, also the bundles."

A wave of dismay surged over Benny.

"What do you say that for? I never did anything to you," he protested.

"You have done to me. You have made the eye of Mr. Bentley look me suspect. He give me the harsh word. I will not have. It is you who have done that to me."

Benny was silent. He had told Mr. Bentley of Ivan's constant little sly ac-

tions, done to provoke him and work him trouble, and Mr. Bentley had told the overseer to watch the Polish boy. All this Benny well knew, and he wished he had kept his own counsel.

"You are to me disagreeable," continued Ivan, "and now you are to be made take the disagreeable. You are to leave these things here, and to say you have lose, or I will beat you."

Poor Benny! This was a hard alternative, to be untrue to the trust placed in him, to be false to himself and his employer, or to suffer bodily hurt. Then he suddenly remembered his father, and that he had once said, "Never be afraid of bodily hurt; that can get well and show no sign, but what hurts your character leaves a worse scar."

His lip quivered, but he said, bravely, "I shall not leave the things here." Then

with one swift movement he broke away from Ivan, jumped over the bushes, picked up his packages, and started to run. Ivan having quickly recovered from the surprise, followed.

On, on, Benny ran, each moment expecting to feel Ivan's rough grasp on his shoulder. But at a sudden cry from the Polish boy he turned his head, to see Ivan wildly leaping in an opposite direction over bushes and logs; and making the best of his chances, Benny proceeded to get out of the woods as soon as possible without waiting to see what was wrong with his pursuer. And before long he was on the open road.

"I wonder what was the matter with him," thought Benny. "He acted as if he were scared to death; as if he thought something was after him."

He never did find out what had fright-

ened Ivan, but the truth of the matter was that a big black snake, of the variety called familiarly a "racer," had appeared in the path between Ivan and his victim, and Ivan had been terrified at sight of the creature which seemed about to pursue him as he was pursuing Benny. So in great fright he turned and fled, and only overcame his fear sufficiently to return to the house long after Benny was safe beyond his reach.

But the encounter gave Benny sufficient anxiety to make him very cautious about meeting Ivan, and he was in a state of nervous terror whenever Ivan came near him in the strawberry field, while he was filled with apprehension when he thought about undertaking another trip to Mr. Welch's.

But fortune again favored him, for when he went to the house the next morning

for breakfast he missed from the kitchen the old colored cook, and found in her place Mrs. Bentley looking anxious and worried.

"You'll have to make out the best you can this morning," she said, turning to the hands. "Roxy is sick, and there isn't a soul to help me. I'm at my wits' ends; picking season, and so much to do, and I hardly know which way to turn."

"Don't you bother about us," said one of the men, "we'll make out."

Benny watched the slight little woman lifting heavy pots and pans from the stove, and sprang to help her.

All the time he was eating his breakfast there was a struggle going on within him. He felt that he ought to offer to help Mrs. Bentley, but that meant giving up his earnings in the strawberry field; on the other hand, it would be a great

relief to be out of Ivan's way, and perhaps that fact as much as his real generosity made him linger, after the men had left the kitchen, to say, shyly, "Can I help you?"

Mrs. Bentley turned in surprise. "You? Why, what can you do?"

"I can wash dishes; I often do for mother. I wash, and sister wipes; and I can sweep up, too. Besides I can amuse the children and keep them out of the way." This last was said with great seriousness, as if he had long since left childhood behind him.

Mrs. Bentley looked at the stout little figure, at the round, good-humored freckled face, the brown hair plastered back by two wet hands, at the neatly patched clothes, and faded, well worn, though clean, shirt waist, and her face took on an expression of relief.

"That will be a great help," she said. "I shall be glad enough to have you stay. My husband told me that you did not belong to the gang of pickers that he brought down, but he didn't know he was employing a helper for me when he took you. Your name is Ben, isn't it? Well, Ben, you sha'n't lose by it." And for the rest of the day Benny found himself Mrs. Bentley's right-hand man. He smiled once or twice at his odd position, and wondered what the boys would say—the boys who were now, probably, playing "knuckle down" in the street. How they would make fun of him and call him "Miss Betty." Well, it didn't matter; they were probably quarreling over their marbles, while he was feeding chickens and washing dishes.

Mrs. Bentley watched him narrowly, especially when during a moment's res-

pite from kitchen work he played horse for the children.

But the black-browed Polish boy, Ivan, coming up to the pump for water, scowled as he saw the little fellow so at home with the children. "Sneakee!" he growled at Benny.

The boy's face flushed. "I'm not a sneak," he replied. "I don't know what you mean by saying that."

"You very fine, very good," Ivan replied. "I pay. You see."

"What does make him hate me so?" thought Benny. "I'm not hurting him. I believe he's jealous." And at the thought he smiled. Ivan looking over his shoulder saw the smile and shook his fist as he vanished down the path.

Little Alice put up a scared face, and clung to Benny, who took her in his arms

and comforted her, and soon all fear of Ivan had left the little group.

Ivan, however, did not forget, for when Benny, whistling cheerily, went to the dairy at Mrs. Bentley's bidding, Ivan, who was on the watch for some such proceeding, saw the boy go down the hill, and a gleam of satisfaction came over his face, as, leaving his work, he followed. Benny was bearing a crock of milk up to the house when suddenly something whizzed through the air and struck sharply against the crock, breaking it, spilling its contents all over the ground, and flooding the boy's feet with a milky torrent.

Poor little Benny knew not what to do. For a moment he was tempted to hide the pieces, go back to the dairy, get another crock, and say nothing about the matter; but almost instantly he recoiled from the

temptation and told himself he was a coward for even thinking of such a thing, and therefore bearing the broken pieces back to the house, he showed them to Mrs. Bentley. "I am awfully sorry," he faltered. "I don't know how it happened. Something seemed to come out of the air and strike the crock. I didn't see anybody, and can't imagine how it happened."

Mrs. Bentley looked a little suspiciously at the boy. It was natural for boys to make excuses, she reasoned, and it was on the point of her tongue to say that she had very frequently been told of breakages which had occurred by articles coming to pieces in her servant's hands in some mysterious way, when they were broken through carelessness; but just here little Jamie piped up:

"I know how it happened. That ugly, big boy, one of the pickers, threw a stone

at Ben. I saw him; he was hiding in the bushes by the spring and he ran."

"It was Ivan," cried Benny. "I know it was." And upon being questioned he gave some account of the persecutions he had endured, while Mrs. Bentley listened gravely.

"I don't see how you have stood it," she said; "but we'll have no more such tricks. I can't have such an evil-minded person around here. There is no telling what he might do. He'll have to go."

And the next morning Benny was informed that Ivan had been dismissed, and had gone back to the city.

Benny breathed freer after this. He had dreaded immeasurably sleeping in the quarters, so close to Ivan, as he was obliged to be. And to his unspeakable relief, after supper, Mrs. Bentley said to him, "If you are going to be my helper,

Ben, I'd rather you'd sleep at the house. Those pickers are not very clean."

And he was shown a little room under the eaves, where he lay down and slept peacefully.

CHAPTER V

BENNY AND A RING

IT was very pleasant to be awakened in the morning by the song of birds, and Benny felt inclined to lie still and listen to them, but he suddenly remembered that he was not there as a picker, and could not be quite so independent in the matter of hours and minutes. He must get up and go down to help Mrs. Bentley. Therefore he jumped up and quickly dressed himself, and had the fire made before Mrs. Bentley appeared. She smiled her satisfaction. It was something, after all, to have a small willing boy in place of a lazy, shiftless woman, and she hardly regretted her slovenly and incompetent servant, al-

though the work of getting breakfast was all her own.

Benny, however, tried to make it easy for her. He brought in water, fed the chickens, went to the dairy, and even set the table, with the help of little Jamie, who showed him where to get dishes and knives and forks. He had finished with satisfaction, for he had given a finishing touch by bringing in a bunch of wild roses he had discovered on his way to the spring, and these he had placed in a glass in the middle of the table.

"Do you like flowers, Benny?" Mrs. Bentley asked, as she saw his pride in the ornament.

"'Deed I do," Benny replied.

"Then you shall work in my garden when you have helped me through the morning's work. It has been sadly neglected of late, for we have been so short

of help. I reckon pulling weeds will be as easy as picking strawberries, and you will be in the shade part of the time, which is more than you would be out there in the fields. Now, come sit down, and help us eat some of the strawberries you have helped to pick. We have some famous big ones this morning; unless you are tired of them," she added.

Benny stoutly declared that he was not, and soberly said: "You know I didn't get paid to eat them, but to pick them," at which speech every one laughed. So, feeling a little bashful at that, Benny added: "Besides, there is no cream or sugar or biscuits to eat with them out there in the strawberry patch." But this did not help matters any, for Mr. Bentley burst into a second laugh and told his wife she was very inconsiderate not to furnish these extras to the pickers.

But Mrs. Bentley, seeing the abashed look on Benny's face, told him never to mind, that he had a good right to all he could eat, with cream or without, and that she was glad he was able to enjoy her biscuits.

It was a busy morning, the latter half of it spent among the flower beds. At first Benny was rather puzzled to know the difference between flowers and weeds, but here Jamie came to his rescue, for the little fellow had kept his eyes and his ears open, and being country bred, knew "pusley" from portulacca, and lamb's quarter from China asters. The ill-smelling wormweed was easily enough found out, and after a while Ben grew to know the purslane, because it was so very pushing, and he understood what Mrs. Bentley meant when she said something was as "mean as pusley," for it

certainly did seem to crop up in every direction.

Jamie at last grew tired of playing gardener, and left Benny to himself. He worked away busily and saw his pile of weeds growing bigger and bigger, while the flower beds began to look much more orderly. He was smoothing the earth around a rosebush which had been disturbed by the too close shouldering of a big nettle, when he saw something under the green leaves of the bush he had pushed aside. He picked up the shining thing and brushed off the clay from a gold ring which had lain hidden, he did not know how long. He turned it over in his hand. It was a pretty ring with a row of blue stones in it, like little pieces of sky, Benny thought. He would like to take it home to Kitty. How pleased she would be. It was rather large for her

little hand, to be sure, but she could keep it till she grew older.

But all at once came the thought. Why, it isn't mine. Some one must have lost it, and will be glad to get it again. "I ought to have thought of that at first," Benny muttered to himself. He wasted no time in running around to the kitchen, stopping on the way to give the ring a good washing at the pump. He carried it, looking very bright and shining in the palm of his hand, to Mrs. Bentley.

"Mrs. Bentley," he said, "see what I have found. Is it yours?" He went over to where she was putting the finishing touches to a toothsome-looking pie.

She took the ring and turned it over, then she looked at Benny's honest little face. "No, it isn't mine," she told him, "but I know whose it is, and she'll be glad enough to get it again. She will so,"

she added after a moment's thought. "It is Beulah Martin's. She is my niece, and she lives down the road about a mile." She held the ring, lightly tossing it about in her palm. "I tell you what you shall do; you shall go and take it to her as soon as you have helped me through the dinner dishes. You have worked like a Trojan this morning and you deserve to have a little time to go down there. It isn't so very far. You might go down with one of the wagons and they can put you off at the gate." She did not say anything about Ben's honesty in bringing it to her, and he was glad she had taken it for granted that he would do just that thing. He was better pleased than if she had been surprised at his doing it.

So, about three o'clock, he started off down the level white road, mounted on the high seat of one of the wagons.

"That's Martins'," the driver said, as they approached a yellow house among the trees.

Benny clambered down and trudged up the lane. He was wondering whether he should knock at the front door or go around to the kitchen, when he saw that some one was sitting on the top step of the porch. As he came nearer he saw that it was a pretty girl in a pink dress. She had some embroidery in her hand and was busily working upon it. A big dog, seeing a stranger coming, jumped up from where he was lying under a tree, and began to bark furiously. "Rod, Rod, come back!" called the girl. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, sir? Don't be afraid of him, little boy, he won't hurt you, but he thinks it is his duty to bark at anyone who comes up the walk, unless it is one of the family."

"I'm not afraid," Benny replied. "I think he looks like a nice dog. See, he is wagging his tail." And so he was, and Benny patted him on the head, an attention the dog seemed to receive in good part, for he looked up at the little boy and put up a huge paw to be shaken. "He is a very nice dog," Benny repeated, well pleased to be friends with the creature.

"So he is," the girl replied. "His name is Roderick. What is yours?"

"Mine is Benny Jordan. Are you Miss Beulah Martin?"

"Yes; how did you know?"

"Mrs. Bentley told me."

"Aunt Mary? Did she send you over?"

"Yes, at least I found this and she told me where to bring it." He held out the ring, coming a step nearer.

"Oh!" The color flew up into the

girl's face. "Oh, how glad I am. You don't know how glad I am. Tell me all about it."

Benny told her where he had found it, under a certain rosebush, and how the big nettle had grown up there, and that he had seen this shining thing at its roots. The girl listened with her eyes on the ring.

"You were a dear child to bring it right away," she said, when he had finished.

"Mrs. Bentley told me to. I work there, you know."

Beulah questioned him, and he told her how and why he had come. Her eyes looked at him wistfully when he had finished. "I wish I had something to give you for finding this."

Benny put his hands behind him. "Oh, but I wouldn't take it. I didn't

work for it. I just happened to find it, and I am as glad as can be that I did."

"I value it very much. I don't think I own anything that I value so much, and I do want to give you something, but I can't, I'm afraid, for we're not very rich, and I hardly ever have any money to spend. I want you to have a piece of cake, though. I made it myself this morning."

Benny felt that he need not refuse a piece of cake, and he sat down on the step while she went to get it. She came back with what Benny thought was the most delicious slice of cake he had ever tasted. As he sat there eating it, Beulah said: "Let's pretend I am a fairy who could grant you your wish, something just for your own self and nobody else; what would you like? So long as I can't give it to you, it won't do any harm, and we

can make out that I am going to give you something more than my thanks."

Benny was nothing loth to play "make pretend"; he and Kitty had played it too often for it to be an unfamiliar game. So he sat soberly thinking and munching his cake. There was one thing he wanted very, very much; so much that he scarcely liked to utter the wish, for it was so near his heart. He had dreamed of it, longed for it, but it was something so unattainable that he could never dare to hope for it. But after a little while he said, shyly and hesitatingly: "I want a bicycle, awfully."

Beulah dropped her work in her lap and gave a little scream of delight. "To think you should say that! And to think I forgot! Why, that is the one thing—just wait a minute." She jumped up and ran around the side of the house. Pres-

ently, Benny heard her call, "Benny, Benny, come here!"

He followed the voice which led him to the door of an old building used as a sort of shop. In the doorway Beulah was standing. "Come here," she said. "Do you think this will do?"

Was she fooling him? Was this a "make pretend"? His heart beat fast as he saw that she really did have her hand on something which looked like a wheel, and, as he came up, she rolled out a bicycle; not a very new one, but one in pretty good condition and just about the size for a boy of his inches.

"Look here," she said, "I believe this is just big enough for you. My uncle gave it to my brother two or three years ago. Charlie has outgrown it, for he has grown so tall. Now he is at my uncle's in the city where he is going to school,

and when he went away he said: 'Sis, you can have my old wheel; maybe somebody will buy it and you can have what it will bring.' But nobody about here has wanted it, so it is on my hands. Now, please, please, won't you take it? I'd be so glad if you would."

"Really?" he said. "Honest, do you want me to have it?"

"Honest, I do. I'd rather you would have it than anyone in the world. Just try it and see how it goes. It had the tires blown up not so very long ago, so I reckon that will not need to be done right away."

Benny mounted—what boy does not know how to ride a wheel?—and rode around the house once or twice. "She goes like a breeze," he said, his face shining.

"Then she's yours."

Benny looked at Beulah. She held against her lips the ring which she had slipped on her finger. "If you love that ring half as much as I do this wheel," he said, presently, "you're mighty fond of it."

Beulah laughed. The soft color flushed up into her cheeks again. She gave his shoulder a gentle pressure. "I do," she told him, "and more."

"Did I say thank you, Miss Beulah? If I didn't, I think it a hundred thousand times."

"And I say, thank you a hundred thousand times. Good-by!" For Benny had mounted his wheel and was spinning down the level road, the happiest boy anywhere about.

CHAPTER VI

BEN'S BEAUTIFUL SURPRISE

WHEN Saturday came Benny set off on his wheel for his visit to the Welch's, a very happy little boy, with his hard earnings in his pocket. As he neared the store he saw Jennie on the lookout for him. He could scarcely wait to show his wheel, and made his pedal go as he covered the last few rods. "See my wheel," he cried. "Aren't you surprised to see me on one?"

But Jennie hardly noticed the wheel. "He's come, father, he's come!" she cried. "Oh, Benny, we've such a beautiful surprise to show you. Hurry! Hurry!"

Benny hastened his step at Jennie's call, wondering the while what this fine

surprise might be. "Maybe it's some more puppies," he thought, and he followed Jennie around to the side porch. "Sit down on that step," said Jennie, "and you'll see something fine."

Benny did as he was bid, and the next moment two hands were clasped over his eyes. "Guess who!" cried Jennie, but before he could decide a familiar little laugh came to his ears, and the secret was out. "Kitty!" he cried, jumping up. "Oh, Kitty, how did you get here? Is mother with you?"

"No," answered Kitty, "there is only me for you to see. I'll tell you all about it. This morning Mrs. Welch and Jennie came to town, and they came to our house straight off, and asked mother to let me come back with them this afternoon. Mrs. Welch said that you had told them about me and that Jennie wanted so much

to have me come; and mother hurried and got me ready and I came, and I am going to stay a week. Oh, Benny, I am so glad to see you, and isn't it all lovely?"

Benny was ready to agree with her most emphatically.

"I didn't want to leave mother all alone, but she was so glad to have me come, and Miss Perkins is going to stay with her while we are away. Mrs. Welch brought mother some lovely strawberries and some eggs, and she'll have a feast to-morrow. Oh, Benny, aren't they good? Now tell me everything, I want so much to hear." And Benny proceeded to tell his experiences to a very much interested little girl, who was properly indignant, pleased, or proud, as the case might be.

"And oh, Benny," said Kitty, when he had told of Mr. Welch's kindness, "Jennie is so dear; she just begged to have me

come, and we have had such a good time to-day." The fact of the matter was that Jennie's quiet sympathies had been so aroused by Benny's account of his delicate little sister that she had implored her parents to ask Kitty to come and make her a visit, and would not rest till her mother had taken her to town to see Kitty, and Mrs. Jordan's consent was then won without much difficulty.

Three very happy children they were who went down to see the collie puppies, and who laughed to see the tiny speckled pigs with curly tails, and who viewed the poultry yard with much pride, Jennie, growing ecstatic over the broods of pretty downy chickens. It was while she was cuddling a yellow duckling that they were summoned to the house to help Mrs. Welch to make ice cream. Benny made himself most useful, pounding the

ice and turning the freezer with a good will.

"Is it anybody's birthday? It's just like a festival," said Kitty. "Strawberries and ice cream and cake. Think of it, Benny; I didn't know people ever had such things just in an everyday way; I thought they only had them when they had festivals or parties or something."

"I suppose it is somebody's birthday," said Mrs. Welch, laughing, "but I don't know just whose. We make ice cream very often in summer, for we've an ice-house full of ice, and plenty of cream. Suppose we celebrate your birthday to-day?"

Kitty, very much pleased at the suggestion, looked up with a radiant smile.

"Oh, then she'll have to have some birthday gifts," said Jennie, and she ran off to have a consultation with her father,

the result of which was that at supper-time Kitty's plate was piled high with packages, not of very much value, but they represented great bounty to Kitty, who so seldom had anything new. First there was a cunning little china tea set from Jennie, then a small doll from Mollie, a little box of candy from Mr. Welch, and a handkerchief from Joe, while Mrs. Welch placed before her a big frosted cake on which the name "Kitty" was outlined with little pink candies.

Kitty looked from one to the other in speechless joy, and Benny was so overcome with gratitude at such kindness that he turned to Joe, who sat next him, and hugged him in the most energetic manner.

For once in his life Benny had all the ice cream and strawberries that he could eat. It would not be well to state how

many saucerfuls he ate, for the statement might seem a doubtful one, and it is still a greater surprise that he was not made ill.

The peaceful Sabbath came with a soft, blue sky, with orioles and wrens singing in the flowering honeysuckles which grew around the porch; with sweet odors wafted up from the roses in the garden; with everything so fair, so quiet, so beautiful, that Benny and Kitty both felt a new reverence for the day, and they started off for Sunday-school as happy as possible. Mrs. Welch had dressed Kitty in one of the pretty little white dresses that Jennie had outgrown, had put upon her feet a pair of nice tan shoes which were too small for Jennie, had curled the little maid's fair hair so that when she appeared with her sweet little face shining with pleasure, even Mr. Welch gave her

an admiring glance, and said, "Well, little one, you look as sweet as that rose-bud pinned on your frock."

Kitty looked up at him with gratitude. "It must be nice to have a father," she said, and the good man turned away to hide his feelings.

"Poor little tots," he said to his wife, as the children went out the gate, "it's pretty tough when a man has to leave children like those unprovided for."

"Then don't you do it, Thad," said his wife, with a twinkle in her eye.

Mr. Welch laughed and started out to follow the children.

The little picker took his way back to Mr. Bentley's early the next morning, feeling that, with Kitty so near, and the happy memory of that delightful visit, he could get through the week quite happily, especially since he was now deliv-

ered of the disagreeable presence of Ivan, and no longer was compelled to sleep in the pickers' quarters.

"If Mrs. Bentley wants your help you just do what she tells you," Mr. Bentley said to him, "and it will be the same as if you worked in the field. I'll make it all right." In consequence there were many times when Benny was bidden to go for the mail, which gave the happiness of a few words with Kitty; again, he was sent to get vegetables from the garden, to bring milk from the dairy, to help Mrs. Bentley with her chickens, until he learned many things of which he had hitherto been ignorant. He particularly liked to work in the garden, and Mrs. Bentley was well pleased to have some one to carry flower-pots, to make a border, or to help her transplant the growing flowers.

"I shall have a fine garden this

year," she said to her husband, "that little Ben is so quick and willing, and is so interested in what he does. I should really like to keep him here all the time."

"I reckon his mother will want him home again," replied Mr. Bentley, "but we'll have him down early next year. Thad Welch says he is an uncommonly nice little fellow."

"I'll take him to the picnic with me," said Mrs. Bentley, "he makes himself so useful, and will be such a help with the children; besides, he will enjoy a holiday."

And so, to Benny's great delight, he was told that he was invited to a Sunday-school picnic. He had heard great tales of it from the Welches, and Kitty was in a high state of excitement over it.

"Oh, I'm going to the picnic!" he glee-

fully told the two little girls the next time he went for the mail.

"Oh! oh!" cried the two children, "Ben is going! How fine! I thought you said you couldn't go, Benny."

"Well, I didn't think I could. Mr. Bentley didn't say anything about my stopping work; but now Mrs. Bentley says she wants me to go with her; and Oh, Kit! she's making cakes and pies, and frying chicken, and making biscuit till you can't rest! I tell you she's got a lot cooked!"

"So have we," put in Jennie. "I must tell mother right away that you are going; she'll be so glad."

A long drive in the big Dayton, in which were stowed sundry baskets, brought the picnicers to a pleasant grove which overlooked a beautiful creek. And it would be useless to try to tell

what a good time the children had; of how they swung on the grapevine swings; of how they gathered lovely, sweet-smelling magnolias; of how they fished from a little rowboat, and of how they ate unlimited supplies of good things; then the games that they played and the songs that they sang, till, just as a glorious sunset touched the water with long streaks of rose and gold, they made ready to drive home. If was all entirely too delightful not to give enjoyment during every minute of the day to the little city children who had scarcely ever been beyond brick walls, and they joined heartily in the homeward singing, going to bed at last with very tired bodies, but very happy hearts.

"Do you think you can help me churn?" Mrs. Bentley asked Benny the next morning.

"I don't know," replied he. "I never saw how butter is made, but I'll try."

"Oh, well, that is all I want you to do. There is not much skill required, and if you keep the handle of the churn going that is all you need do."

So, under a widespreading chestnut tree, Benny set to work at this new employment. It was rather monotonous work, but he could do it mechanically and let his eyes rove over field and sky till, after a while, he felt the cream growing more and more lumpy.

There was a long lane leading from the road up to the house, the gate opening into it from the side yard being nearly always open. Just before the gate little Alice was playing contentedly in the sand with sticks and pebbles.

Benny turned to look at her when he saw something which made him drop his

churn handle and run swiftly. A buggy was coming up the lane, the horse rushing on furiously. It was evident that the girl who was driving had lost control of her horse. It was Molly Welch who held the reins, and her horse was running away. In another instant the horse would reach the gate. Not only was Molly in danger, but little Alice was directly in the road. Benny rushed forward with one thought uppermost—if he could only reach the gate and shut it. It was a race between him and the runaway horse. He darted off, reached Alice, flung her aside, and made a last desperate rush for the gate.

CHAPTER VII

HIS FATHER'S PLAN

JUST as Benny closed the gate with a slam the runaway horse reached it and stopped short, trembling in every limb. The girl in the buggy was as pale as a ghost. Two or three men came running up, and Benny suddenly found himself a hero. He had fallen to the ground as the gate swung to, and had struck his head so that his temple was bleeding slightly. Little Alice was crying that Benny had knocked her down, and Mrs. Bentley came running from the house.

She had seen the accident from the kitchen window, and without losing her hold on her little girl, whom she tenderly

picked up, she clasped Benny in her arms as he staggered to his feet.

"Oh, you dear, brave little boy!" she cried. "You have saved my baby, and you might have been killed yourself! Oh, how thankful I am; how very thankful! And oh, it is Molly Welch! You have saved Molly, too! Such a little boy, and so brave!"

By this time Molly was out of the buggy, and the men had quieted down the trembling horse. "It was the slickest trick I ever saw," said one of the men. "One of those women among the pickers left a baby carriage out in the road, and it scared the horse nearly to death. We saw he was getting skittish when he passed, and we ran, but 'twarn't no use. We couldn't git there, and this here youngster just ups and runs to the gate. It was a pretty spunky thing to do, for he

was just in the nick of time. Another minute and the horse would have trampled him."

"Why, it's our little Benny," said Molly, with a quaver in her voice. "Why, Benny, don't you know me?" for Benny was looking around in a dazed sort of a way.

"Oh, yes, I know you," he said, "but I feel sort of queer."

"Come in, Molly, and let me give you a cup of tea," said Mrs. Bentley; "you look so white, and no wonder. And Benny, I must patch up your poor head," and she put her arm around the boy with a real mother-look on her face.

"I was just coming over to see if we could get some of your strawberries," Molly said. "Ours are about gone. I've often driven this horse before; father thought him perfectly safe."

"Any horse would be scared at seeing such a thing as a baby carriage with a flapping parasol, in the road. Those pickers bring all sorts of things with them, and have so little discretion about where they leave things. You shall not drive that horse home; we will send you with one of our horses," said Mrs. Bentley.

And then Benny, with his aching head, was sent up to his quiet little room, while Mrs. Bentley and Molly had a long talk.

"That is one of the nicest little fellows I ever saw," Molly remarked. "We took such a fancy to him at our house, with his homely, freckled little face. And his little sister Kitty is the dearest child. They have been very well brought up, and must have a very good mother."

"Ben has been a great comfort to me," returned Mrs. Bentley. "I don't know what I should have done without him

while Roy has been sick. He is always so quick and cheerful, and his dear little round face is always so sunny. And—" here the tears came to her eyes—" I know Mr. Bentley will think he can't do enough for him, for Alice is the apple of his eye."

" And my father, I'm sure, will feel the same," Mollie returned. " What can we do for him? They must be poor, or he wouldn't have come here as a picker."

That evening Mr. Welch made his appearance. He and Mr. Bentley stood out by the fence a long time before they came to the house. Then they came and sat down one on each side of Benny, where he was on the doorstep listening to the whippoorwills.

" Benny, my lad," said Mr. Welch, " you don't know what you've done for us two men. You must let us do something for you."

"You have done ever so much for me. Oh, Mr. Welch, just think how kind you have been, you and Mr. Bentley, too. And do you think I could have let little Alice and Miss Molly get hurt without trying to do that? I only did what my father and mother would want me to, sir."

"You like the country very much, don't you, Benny?" Mr. Welch continued. "You told me so in the boat, and you said your mother was a country girl before she was married, and that your father was brought up on a farm."

"Yes, sir."

"And that your father always planned to have a little place of his own, and that the doctor says your little sister needs country air."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, my lad, we're not very rich, my

neighbor Bentley and myself, but we're well enough off to pay our debts, and we owe you a big one. I've a little place, not much of an affair, a four or five room house, with an acre of ground. It's about half way between here and my store. And I offer it to you rent free. Mr. Bentley says he'll stock it up for you with chickens and such things, and that you shall never want for fruit, and vegetables, and feed, while he has any. My wife says she has a fine little pig for you, and Molly has a young heifer that she insists upon calling yours. So if you want to come down here and live among people that will always look out for you, you've but to say the word."

Benny looked from one to the other, only saying, "Oh! oh, sir! Oh, Mr. Welch!"

"Yes," put in Mr. Bentley, "we'll look

out for you, my boy. It was a lucky day for us when you got left on that steamboat. And now, Ben, I'll take you up to town to-morrow, if you want to go, and talk it over with your mother. I've got to go hunt up help for my wife. So you can go along if you like."

And then Benny went into the house to see Mrs. Bentley standing with shining eyes, she having heard all the talk.

As she took a candle from the table to give into Benny's hands, she stooped and kissed him, saying, "God bless you, my dear little boy!"

Two such laden-down little figures as made their way up the narrow street the next day; and not less laden down was their companion, Mr. Bentley. Kitty would not be left behind, and helped to convey peas and strawberries, a big bottle of rich cream, a fine roll of butter, eggs,

and home-made cake, and best of all, a huge bunch of roses, over which Benny's blue eyes peeped as bright as two stars.

What a glad mother it was who welcomed home her darlings with sweet surprise! And how Kitty laughed as one after another of the country gifts were shown! And what a thankful little family it was that Mr. Bentley left that evening when it was all settled that they should go to live in Mr. Welch's house!

"You can find plenty of customers, Mrs. Jordan," said Mr. Bentley. "There is a great scarcity of persons who can sew for us in our neighborhood just now. Miss Grant got married last fall and came to town to live, and Mrs. Larkins is too old to sew, so there is only Miss Thompson left, and she hasn't time to give everyone, so you'll find plenty to do if you want

SUCH A GLAD MOTHER

it, and thankful enough the women will be not to have to traipse up to town every time a dress is to be made."

And therefore a few weeks later, when strawberries were gone and shining blackberries grew along the hedgerows, when early apples were ripening in the orchards and huge watermelons were bringing a promise of heavy loads for the market, the Jordans came to their new home, their furniture having gone down the day before, free of charge, on Mr. Bentley's "bug-eye."

A regular surprise party there was to receive them—all the Welches and all the Bentleys. The dear collie puppy was made over to Ben by Joe Welch; Molly's heifer lowed in the cowshed; ten fine hens and two pretty roosters strutted about in the little back yard; Mrs. Welch's fat pig grunted in a new sty, and between

smiles and tears, Mrs. Jordan said that she had never seen any but a minister's family so supplied with good things.

The next year Benny was not among the pickers; he was going to the district school with Kitty, whose pale cheeks had gained a wild rose hue. And Benny had a little garden of his own, a garden in which he took much pride, for it had been planted and tended by himself alone. The rows of radishes and lettuce were, to be sure, rather uneven, and the corn in some places had refused to come up at all, but it was a very fair beginning for a little boy, and showed what might be expected later.

Mr. Welch says some day when Joe goes to the city to live he shall want a clerk in his store, and Mr. Bentley says some day he shall want an overseer on his farm. Therefore Benny finds it a

rather difficult matter to decide which of these two opportunities shall be his to take.

Kitty, however, settled it for him one evening when they were sitting out on their little vine-covered porch. "I think," she said, "that you'd better go to Mr. Welch's first, 'cause he was your first friend, and when you have learned all about storekeeping you can go to Mr. Bentley and manage his farm, and Miss Molly's husband can be in Mr. Welch's store." Who Miss Molly's husband is to be has not yet been decided, but no doubt when he does appear he will be glad to have his future so plainly set before him.

"That's a right good plan," was Benny's reply to his sister.

"And if you see any poor little boys among your pickers you'll make it worth

their while, won't you, Benny?" said Kitty.

"I will that," replied Benny, emphatically.

And just then was heard their mother's voice, "Come in, children, your bread and milk is waiting for you."

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